29 December 2003

U.S. Officials Report Progress on Mad Cow Investigation
Risk to consumers "virtually zero" despite recall, USDA says

U.S. consumers are at "virtually zero risk" from bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), or mad cow disease, despite the discovery late December of an infected dairy cow in the northwestern state of Washington, say officials of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

During a December 29 news briefing, USDA Chief Veterinarian Ron DeHaven said that records kept by the farmer who owned the BSE-infected cow show the animal was likely born in Canada in April 1997 and imported to the United States in 2001. He said there was no sign to date that the disease had spread or of danger to consumers.

"Even though we are still early in this investigation there is no indication that we have the magnitude of problem that Europe has experienced in the years past," DeHaven told reporters during the news briefing in Washington.

He stressed that meat sold commercially in the United States remains safe to eat. He cited research showing that prion, the infectious agent that causes BSE, is not found in the skeletal muscle tissue used for steaks and other cuts of meat commonly sold in U.S. supermarkets. "The infective agent is largely in the brain and spinal cord and a few other tissues not normally consumed by humans in this country," DeHaven said.

The U.S. government has recalled the meat that was processed along with that of the infected animal out of an "abundance of caution" and in response to consumers' concerns following discovery of the infected cow, the official added.

DeHaven told reporters that the age of the diseased cow is significant because an April 1997 birth date means the animal was born four months before the United States and Canada banned the use of cattle feed containing brain and spinal cord tissue from other ruminants. Scientists believe that BSE is spread primarily through feed that includes such tissue from infected cows.

With respect to BSE's danger to human beings, there is a similar fatal, brain-wasting disease called variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD), or vCJD, which is believed to be caused when people eat neural tissue from BSE-affected cattle.

DeHaven said DNA studies would confirm the origin of the infected cow and that U.S. officials were working closely with their Canadian counterparts to establish with certainty the cow's birthplace. A single case of mad cow disease struck Alberta, Canada, in May 2003, but Canadian officials have warned against linking the two incidents without sufficient evidence.

The infected Washington State cow produced three calves after entering the United States. One calf died, another remains in a herd in Washington State, and a third is being held in isolation, USDA officials said. The U.S. farm where the infected cow was kept before slaughter has quarantined its remaining 4,000 head of cattle.

The USDA also said it was trying to determine the whereabouts of an additional eight cows that were shipped from Canada to the United States along with the infected cow. A total of 81 animals from the infected cow's birth herd are now being traced, DeHaven said.

Meat from the affected Holstein and 19 other slaughtered cows was sold in Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Alaska, Montana, Hawaii, Idaho, as well as the U.S. territory of Guam, according to Kenneth Petersen of the U.S. Food Safety and Inspection Service (APHIS).

Following is the USDA transcript of the briefing:

(begin transcript)

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Office of Communications

Technical Briefing and Webcast with U.S. Government Officials on BSE Case
Washington, D.C.
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DR. RON DEHAVEN: Let me speak first from an investigation standpoint. We are continuing to work with our Canadian colleagues to verify the trace-back of the indexed or positive animal.

One issue that has been of particular concern was the initial discrepancy in the age of the animal as reported by our records in the US versus those records that were available in Canada.

Yesterday I personally telephoned the owner of this herd where the positive animal was located primarily to thank him for his cooperation thus far in this effort. However, during that discussion he indicated that he has conducted an extensive search of his records and located original documents that would indicate that the cow in question, this positive animal, was indeed an older animal when he purchased her in 2001.

Those records are consistent with the Canadian records indicating that this animal was born in April of 1997, making her approximately 6 1/2 years old at the time of slaughter. So again I want to personally thank him and his employees for the extraordinary level of cooperation that they have shown to our investigators throughout what is no doubt a very difficult time for them.

The age of the animal is especially important in that it is a likely explanation as to how this animal would have become infected. She would have been born before feed bans were implemented in North America. As the feed bans in the US and Canada both went into effect in August of 1997, as I mentioned records would now indicate that this animal was born in April of 1997.

Again, those feed bans prohibit the inclusion of ruminant protein -- that would be material from animals such as cattle, sheep and goats -- from being fed back to other ruminants. Research evidence suggests that this is the primary, if not in fact the only, means by which BSE is spread from animal to animal. Obviously the more time goes by the fewer

animals that are alive that would have been exposed to feed before this feed ban went into place, and so as time goes by the risk of more animals becoming infected decreases.

Even though we have now resolved or apparently resolved the earlier discrepancy regarding the actual age of this animal, only DNA testing will positively confirm her origin. Again, our primary line of inquiry goes to a farm in Alberta, Canada, and our Canadian counterparts are working hand-in-hand with us sharing information, records and samples that will enable us to perform this DNA testing to hopefully confirm the actual herd of origin for this particular animal.

We are continuing the trace-back of the other 73 head of cattle that came into the United States in the same shipment as the infected cow but do not have any new data to report in that regard at this point. However, while reviewing records we have also determined that an additional eight animals from the same herd in Canada were also shipped to the United States, so we are now tracing the location of all 81 animals.

As I mentioned previously in previous press conferences, this positive cow had three calves while she was in the United States. One of them died shortly after birth, shortly after the animal entered the United States. The second one remains in a herd in Washington State where the positive cow was at the time that she went to slaughter. And the third animal, a bull calf, is currently in a separate herd with several other bull calves, which is subject to a hold order in place by the state of Washington.

And as I explained before as well, this hold order is not to stop the spread of the disease. BSE is not a contagious disease like we associate with conditions such as human flu, but rather the hold order has been put in place to make sure we know where all of the relevant animals are with regard to this investigation and to prevent future complications as it relates to the investigation.

I would emphasize again even though we are following up on these three calves that maternal transmission, transmission from the cow to her offspring, is a rare means of transmission if it occurs at all. Therefore, it would be highly unlikely that this is, this type of transmission would occur in this case. However, as I mentioned, the calves that are still alive, those two, one on the indexed farm and the other in this calf-rearing facility, are on hold orders out of an abundance of caution to preserve public and international confidence that we in fact have the situation well in hand with regard to our investigation.

We are continuing to look at any and all appropriate changes to our entire meat and livestock system as it relates to BSE. Even though we are still early in this investigation there is no indication that we have the magnitude of problem that Europe has experienced in the years past -- in large part due to the preventive measures such as feed bans that were put in place in this country back in August of 1997.

There is also no reason to question the safety of the U.S. beef supply. Muscle tissue or cuts of meats are safe. Research shows that the prion, which is that infectious agent that causes BSE, is not found in skeletal muscle tissue. The infective agent is largely in the brain and spinal cord and a few other tissues not normally consumed by humans in this country.

Research studies in which muscle tissue from infected cattle has been injected directly into the brain of other cattle, the most likely way to transmit the disease when infectivity is present, have demonstrated no evidence of transmission of the disease through muscle tissue.

In contrast, high-risk tissues such as brain or spinal cord in the same study do cause the disease when they are either fed to or injected into recipient cattle.

International standards allow for the import of meat and other commodities even from countries that have a high or moderate risk for BSE. Those countries that have had numerous cases of BSE in their own native-born cattle. These international standards have been developed with the advice and consultation of many of the top international scientists and researchers in the field of BSE. By any stretch of the imagination the U.S. cannot be considered to be at high risk for BSE, especially given our high level of surveillance over the recent past and the fact that only one case has been found here, and further that a single case appears not to have been even born in the United States at this point.

International reaction to our find of this positive case has been based largely on public perception and not what we know about the science of this disease. We have been working with the World Animal Health Organization, the OIE, especially since the finding of the single case of BSE in Canada in May of this year to ensure that the international response to a case of BSE is better founded in science and not just in public perception.

Even with the finding of this single cow, the U.S. remains at very low risk. Measures we put in place in this country years ago -- including the prohibiting of feeding rendered cattle products back to other cattle and stopping cattle imports from high-risk countries -- are protecting the US consumer. Further, we have conducted surveillance testing of high-risk cattle for more than 10 years, and this is our only positive find despite that high level of surveillance testing. For the last two years we conducted approximately 20,000 tests each of those two years -- more than 45 times what the World Animal Health Standard would call upon us to test.

An extensive risk assessment was conducted by Harvard University, and that assessment demonstrated that the risk of BSE in the United States is very low and that even with the disease our procedures that we have put in place would be eliminating the disease from our population.

The producer recalled the meat, and the recall in this situation from this cow and others slaughtered on that day has been done out of an abundance of caution. The risky materials, especially the central nervous system, the brain and spinal cord from this animal, were removed, and they went into rendered product for inedible purposes and did not go into the human food chain.

Again, I want to reiterate my thanks to the herd owner, the slaughter plant owner, the importers, the officials in the state of Washington and our colleagues in Canada for their tremendous assistance as we have proceeded with our investigation. And again, my thanks to you in the news media who have been working so hard to ensure that reporting on this situation is accurate and is timely and recognizing that this situation is evolving very rapidly.

With that, let me pass the microphone to my colleague with Food Safety Inspection Service, Dr. Ken Petersen.

DR. KEN PETERSEN: Thank you, and again, good afternoon.

I'd like to briefly summarize the current situation on the beef products related to the December 23, 2003, BSE recall. The beef products were distributed from Verns Moses Lake Meat to Midway Meat on December 11, 2003. We know that on December 9 when this animal was slaughtered, that was the only animal that tested presumptive positive for BSE. And yet we decided to initiate a recall out of all 20 animals that were slaughtered on that day. The recall was for those 20 carcasses, which involved slightly over 10,000 pounds of meat.

We also know that all of the central nervous system-related tissue -- that is, the brain, the spinal cord and lower part of the intestines -- were removed at the Verns slaughter facility during the slaughter that occurred on December 9, 2003.

Those are the tissues that are most likely to contain the BSE agent. Because the meat leaving Verns did not contain these high-risk material, the recalled beef presents an essentially zero risk to consumers.

This recall was initiated out of an abundance of caution following the report of this one cow testing presumptive positive. Even though we remain confident in the safety of these beef products, we are and we will continue to verify distribution and control of all products related to this recall.

Since the discovery of BSE last week, the Food Safety Inspection Service has been working literally around the clock to ensure the protection of public health. FSIS is verifying that the commercial companies have notified their customers of the recalled product and have also told their customers how to handle recalled products that they have in their possession.

Previously we've discussed the distribution of products from Midway Meats down to Interstate Meats and Willamette Valley Meats. Both of those last two are located in Oregon. We've since found that the products were distributed to an additional 42 locations from Interstate Meats and Willamette Valley Meat. The vast majority of these products, at least 80 percent, were distributed to stores exclusively in the states of Oregon and Wisconsin.

FSIS is verifying that these 42 distributors are complying with their requirement to notify their customers. In overseeing this process, FSIS has found that all of the companies that have received these products have in fact been duly and promptly notifying their customers. We will continue to ensure that this indeed remains the case.

MR. CURLETT: Before we go to questions, I just want to make one announcement. We ask that you limit yourself to one question in the interest of fairness. There are a lot of reporters on, so one question, then we go to the next question. Then we go four here and four on the audio bridge. Okay.

SETH BORENSTEIN (sp): Knight Ridder Newspapers.

What percentage of downers in this year and in past years does get tested for BSE? Why isn't it 100 percent?

DR. DEHAVEN: For those that are listening in on the telephone bridge, this is Dr. Ron DeHaven, chief veterinary officer for USDA. My last name is spelled D-E-H-A-V-E-N.

Let me take an initial response to that and then also provide Dr. Petersen an opportunity to respond.

We have tested as I mentioned the last two years in excess of 20,000 animals per year. We're targeting that surveillance at what we consider to be the high-risk population, first and foremost those animals that are showing nervous system disorder at the time of slaughter and then the secondary population that we are targeting would be those animals that are nonambulatory at the time of slaughter, recognizing that if an animal is exhibiting clinical signs of the disease they most typically are going to be showing central nervous system disorders or would be nonambulatory, wouldn't be able to stand.

And our surveillance testing has been based on a statistically valid sample that would tell us that if the infection existed in the United States even at a low prevalence of one in a million animals that we should find the disease. And so it's on that basis that we feel comfortable when we say, the worst case scenario is the disease exists in the United States at a very low prevalence and even if it is here our procedures and most notably the feed ban would be eliminating the disease.

And that is information that has independently been confirmed by the Harvard Risk Assessment.

One of the pieces of information that we don't have and would certainly need to be gathering in the future is, the total number of nonambulatory animals in the US in a year's time and of those how many are found at slaughter, how many might be at livestock markets, how many might be on the farm.

But again, having said that knowing what we know about the population of animals, cattle in the United States, and the level of surveillance, we feel comfortable that at worst, again, the prevalence of the disease in the US would be very low.

We are also reassured by the fact that, while unfortunate that we found this case, if in fact the animal is 6 1/2 years old as we would now believe it to be, that she would have been born before the feed ban went into effect. And again, evidence that the feed ban, both in Canada and the US, has been effective.

Ken, anything to add?

DR. PETERSEN: I'd just add that at slaughter of course these nonambulatory animals do occasionally arrive. Many times they are recent injuries. Perhaps they even occurred on the transportation truck. But regardless of the cause of these animals being nonambulatory, if it is nonambulatory those animals are always inspected by our USDA veterinarian. That veterinarian looks at the animals and decides whether they may be fit to proceed into the slaughter plant.

Last year those veterinarians that had ante-mortem identified just over 130 animals that had true, clinical signs for central nervous system disease. Those would be the highest risk animals for BSE. All of those animals were tested through the APHIS program.

DR. DEHAVEN: In the interest of time, and I hate to do this, but we can't allow follow-up just so we, we've got a limited amount of time and a lot of questions.

Yes, ma'am, the lady in the red dress?

TRACY WRIGHT: Global Television.

Premier Ralph Klein from Alberta today said that he is frustrated, that you've pointed the finger at Canada before having a final confirmation the cow is from Canada. I'm wondering if you can address that. And also what, you seem to be making different statements yesterday and today about what impact this all might have on reserves, limiting of the ban or lifting of (unclear) live animals.

DR. DEHAVEN: In response to your first question indicating that preliminary information suggests that the animal would have originated from and most likely been born in Canada -- it's a difficult call on our part in terms of keeping the public informed on what is a very important and critical issue for them and at the same time not being premature.

That's why we have been very careful to say, and continue to be very careful to say that our primary line of inquiry would lead us back to a farm in Alberta, Canada -- recognizing that we don't have absolute confirmation at this point in time but at the same time in the interest of keeping the public informed of what we know again it will be through DNA testing that will hopefully be able to make absolute confirmation.

In the meantime as I've continued to say as well, we are following every possible line of inquiry. It would be disingenuous not to say however that our primary line of inquiry takes us back to Canada. So a difficult call. I would emphasize that there's no disagreement between U.S. and Canadian officials with the information that we have but rather how we would put that information out to the public.

In terms of lifting restrictions on Canadian product, we continue to allow certain minimal risk products, most notably boneless beef from animals under 30 months of age, into the United States from Canada. We proposed a rule early in November of this year that would potentially allow not only those products but additional products as well as live animals under 30 months of age into this country. Because the comment period is still open and the comment period is officially open until January 5, it would be inappropriate for me to comment further. But that still is a proposed rule. We would encourage and welcome comments on that especially in light of this new situation. And clearly as we contemplate what to do with the comments that we receive from that proposed rule, this new information will be given all due consideration.

Next question, please. Yes, sir. Right here.

RANDY FABI: Randy Fabi with Reuters.

Is the USDA willing to test all U.S. cattle at slaughter like in Japan? Presidential candidate Howard Dean said this would only cost 3 cents a pound to do so. I'm just wondering if that was accurate.

DR. DEHAVEN: We feel very comfortable that we've had in place in this country a very good and appropriate program, given what we know about the disease and given what we know about our exposure to the disease. So I would start by emphasizing that there have been appropriate firewalls and safeguards in place in this country.

I would quickly add however that it's only prudent that given this new finding that we look at our program, our overall system as it relates to US beef in total, and consider changes that we may need to make based on this new information. One of the things that we are looking at is, additional testing and what populations of cattle would be appropriate for that additional testing.

We would hope to also as we take those different options into consideration fall back on the science, and the science would suggest that this is a disease of older animals. Incubation period is typically between 3 and 6 years of age, which is why we've been focusing our testing on not only nonambulatory animals but older animals. That is why we are currently allowing product in from Canada that comes from animals under 30 months of age.

So we need to take into account the science that we know about this disease as we consider any modifications to our overall system. And I can assure you, all of those options are on the table, and they are actively being discussed within USDA as well as with our colleagues in the Food and Drug Administration.

Next question? Yes, sir.

GERALD (unclear) TV News: I heard you on the TV this morning explaining that the U.S. would not trade with (unclear) country (unclear) if that country had (unclear) food ban in place. (unclear) risky material (unclear) food chain. And yet according to the European Union your feed ban isn't sufficient. The European Union, it is not allowed to feed any animal back to any other animal in the U.S. (unclear) these cows (unclear) cows and chickens, chicken waste and pigs are fed back to cows (unclear). (unclear) outlaw in EU. Also you said the risky material (unclear) food chain or you wouldn't trade with that country, but in the European Union the last 8 years, it's been illegal to mechanically recover meat from cattle (unclear) because (unclear) nervous tissue close to the spine. In the U.S. that happens all the time and you can eat (unclear) material. So therefore you wouldn't trade with yourself (unclear).

DR. DEHAVEN: Let me take an initial, make an initial response and then provide Steve Sundlof from FDA the opportunity as well with regard to the feed ban in the UK versus the U.S. Again, I think that's an appropriate issue for our Food and Drug Administration colleagues. But I think I need to explain it in the context of our proposed rule.

This proposed rule would create what we refer to as a minimal risk category. Current regulations in the U.S. recognize either countries who have expressed a case of BSE and those that haven't expressed a case of BSE. That's not been consistent with the OIE or the international standards, and this proposed rule would get us more in line with those international standards that currently exist.

To qualify for that minimal risk category, this proposed rule explains that certain procedures would need to be in place. One of them would be an appropriate feed ban. One of them would ensure that especially for those countries that have expressed a moderate or high prevalence of the disease there would need to be assurance that certain high-risk tissues, those specified risk materials, would have been removed before product came into the United States.

So again, all of those are issues that are currently under consideration in the proposed rule. I would suggest that the comments you are making are appropriate comments to make with regard to that proposed rule.

In the meantime, we, as I mentioned, are working through the international organization and in the international community to make the overall response to trade more based on science and not public perception. I think we've taken a huge step in that regard with our current procedures that allow the importation of certain meat products from Canada and the proposed rule that would even contemplate potentially allowing animals under 30 months of age into the country from Canada.

Let me defer now to Dr. Steve Sundlof.

DR. STEPHEN SUNDLOF (FDA): Thank you, Ron. Let me spell my name for the folks on the phone. It's Stephen, STEPHEN. Sundlof, SUNDLOF. I'm with the Food and Drug Administration.

The question that I'll be responding to is on, the question was, why hasn't the U.S. taken the same approach as the European Union in extending the feed ban to all animal protein so there's no animal proteins could be fed back to any other animal.

First let me say that the U.S. position is consistent with the recommendation of the OIE which is the Office of International Epizootics; that is the equivalent of the World Health Organization but for animal health. The disease is only spread by ruminants consuming -- "ruminants" being cattle, sheep or goats, in this case it's only cattle -- consuming infected material from other cattle. The way that works is that once the cattle have consumed the feed the agent that causes the disease -- we think is a prion, a protein -- actually amplifies, multiplies within the cow and then is transmitted to other animals. But there has to be this amplification process that occurs within the cattle that does not occur in pigs, does not occur in chickens, does not occur in any other animal that we're aware of currently as a food animal except for cattle.

Therefore, the feed ban that has been instituted in the United States is one that is scientifically valid from the standpoint of transmitting the disease to other animals, cattle. And there's been an extensive amount of surveillance and inspection that has gone into this program in the United States such that we now have greater than 99 percent of all firms that handle this ruminant protein are in compliance with our current feed ban.

DR. DEHAVEN: One quick follow-up from our colleague in Food Safety Inspection Service and then we'll take the next question from the phone line.

Ken?

DR. KEN PETERSEN (FSIS): Thanks. Kenneth Petersen, FSIS.

We briefly mentioned AMR or Advanced Meat Recovery, which is a automated process of removing meat from the bones as opposed to a manual process. None of the meat associated with this particular recall was in any way associated with the AMR process. And in fact fewer than 35 locations in the U.S. is AMR-material-produced, so it would be difficult for me to say that is a common practice.

We in FSIS last spring, well before the Canadian event, had proactively initiated a test and hold procedure related to products related to AMR, so that's something we've been actively working on for quite some time.

DR. DEHAVEN: With that, Operator, if we could have the first question from the phone lines, please?

OPERATOR: Thank you, sir. At this time, your first question comes from Andy Dworkin.

ANDY DWORKIN: Yes. This question is for Dr. Petersen. First, quickly, you said at the end of your statement that more than 80 percent of the meat went to stores in Oregon and Wisconsin. I wanted to make sure that you actually I think meant Washington. And the main part of the question is, for some of the other states that you mentioned yesterday such as Montana and Alaska and going as far as Guam, are the locations in those states that you're looking at more the major department stores that might have gotten product from someplace like Interstate or more the smaller ethnic stores that you talked about before?

DR. DEHAVEN: Thank you. And I do appreciate that clarification. In fact I believe I made the same error yesterday. I'm not even from Wisconsin.

The 80 percent of the meat we know was distributed and ended up in the states of Oregon and Washington. Those are the two primary states.

Regarding the additional states that we mentioned yesterday, I indicated that there was limited distribution to those other locations, which was Montana, Hawaii, Idaho, Alaska and the territory of Guam. I limited, I'm just starting to get a handle on that today. It appears that in at least one or so of those states "limited" may mean one location. And in fact we're talking about small quantities that were distributed to largely ethnic retail outlets, though there may be one or two grocery chains in there.

So the additional states that we mentioned yesterday were simply states as we worked through the distribution lists for these companies; we found that they were the locations. Those states came to mind. We wanted to get that information out to you. Now we're looking at where exactly in those states and what were the products involved.

Operator, next question, please?

OPERATOR: Thank you. Next question comes from Tina Hudson. Please state your affiliation.

TINA HUDSON (sp): Hi. I'm with the St. Lewis Post Dispatch.

And my question is about the spontaneous occurrence of BSE. Do we know if BSE can arise spontaneously in the cattle population, and is the current testing level enough to detect BSE should it arise by means other than through tainted feed?

DR. DEHAVEN: Thank you for the question. There is known to occur in humans in the human version of the disease or of the TSE called Crutzfeldt Jakob Disease, the occurrence of or the spontaneous occurrence of the disease, meaning that for no known reason people come down with this disease at the approximate prevalence of 1 in one million.

I mentioned earlier that our surveillance testing has been focused on identifying the disease at a prevalence of 1 in a million infected cattle, and we're testing at enough frequency to have a 95 percent confidence level that we would detect the disease at a 1 in a million prevalence level.

So if we were to extrapolate from the human situation where there apparently is spontaneously occurring CJD, then in fact if it occurs at the same prevalence in cattle then we should detect it.

Having said that, we have no evidence to suggest that BSE occurs spontaneously in cattle. It's one of those situations where it's very, very difficult to prove a negative. How can you prove that it doesn't occur?

So there is no scientific basis to say that we do have spontaneous cases of BSE. On the other hand, we don't have sufficient data at this point to definitively say that it doesn't occur.

This particular situation, now that we know or it would certainly appear that this is an animal that would have been born before the feed ban, would tend to not support or lend no support for the theory of spontaneously occurring BSE. But again, it's proving a negative and we simply don't have enough data to definitively say that it doesn't happen.

Next question, please, Operator?

OPERATOR: (off mike) Mr. Vedantam, please state your affiliation.

SHANKAR VEDANTAM: The Washington Post.

Dr. DeHaven, I was wondering what you found in terms of a connection between the Washington State holstein and the farm where the Canadians found a positive case in May. And in turn, what would this say about any common source of infection upstream, potentially placing other animals at risk, especially in the light of your finding that eight other animals from this farm have been shipped to the US?

DR. DEHAVEN: In response to the question, connection between this case that we've just found and apparent or likely trace-back to Alberta and the previous case that was found in Canada in May of this year, I would just begin by saying, we are early in our investigation. This is just the sixth day. And we have just recently obtained the additional information that would tend to add credence to the theory that the farm of origin is in Canada.

So it would be premature to even speculate if there is or is not any connection between that case found in Canada in May and this case recently found in the state of Washington.

No doubt that will be a very important component of the investigation that will occur in Canada as they look for any possible link between those two. I would simply point out however that we are talking about, in the case in May, a beef herd cattle and in this case with the recent find we're talking about a dairy animal. So we do have that difference between a beef herd and apparent dairy herd.

In terms of the additional eight animals, we had documentation originally on a certificate to show that there were 82 animals approved for import into the United States as part of this shipment, but we do know that initially only 74 of them came and presumably including the infected cow, and then it was on a subsequent shipment that the additional 8 animals came. So we're looking at all 82 of those animals or if you take out the one positive cow all 81 animals as animals that we need to trace in that presumably they all came from this one herd that is our primary line of inquiry at this point.

MR. VEDANTAM: Did all those 8 cases come into Washington state, Doctor?

DR. DEHAVEN: We don't know at this point where those animals are. It's our understanding that all of them did come into the state of Washington, not confirmed nor do we have information at this point as to their current whereabouts. But again, tracing those 81 animals is a focal point of our current investigation.

Next question, please, Operator?

OPERATOR: Thank you. Next question comes from Diane McClure.

DIANE MCCLURE: Hi. I'm with the Chronicle in Centralia, Washington.

My question is, you said that downer cows are always inspected by USDA vets. What about primary receivers of the meat like Midway Meats here in Centralia? Do they do any testing, or do they even know that they're receiving meat from an animal that may have BSE?

DR. DEHAVEN: We'll refer that question to Dr. Ken Petersen with Food Safety Inspection Service.

DR. PETERSEN: Well, in this particular case of course the animal had been slaughtered and then those carcasses were shipped to Midway Meats before the time that the actual positive result came in. And again, at the time this was part of our surveillance program for BSE, and it was based on assumptions of the status of the U.S. when we took that, when the surveillance sample was taken.

So Midway Meats is a federally inspected facility, so they have a variety of controls in place that they are obligated to have. However, because until this case we had not had a native case of BSE in the United States, BSE would not be a control that I would have expected this plant to have in place.

So in this case they wouldn't know because the test result came in after the fact. Those kinds of transactions are certainly something that we're looking into and will consider what appropriate next steps might be.

DR. DEHAVEN: I'll take the next question from here in the room the. Yes, sir, gentleman in the tan coat.

CHRIS BALTIMORE: Thank you. I'm Chris Baltimore with Reuters.

What more can the United States do to ensure firsthand that U.S. beef supply is safe? And what, would the trade delegation travel to other countries like South Korea?

DR. DEHAVEN: In terms of what more can we assure or what other assurances can we provide the Japanese, in fact that's part of the reason that our delegation is there to find out what additional assurance is, given this new information, would they want to reestablish that trade?

So I don't have an answer to that question at this point in time. I would say however that our delegation has extended an invitation to the Japanese for them to send a technical team to the United States, and it's my understanding that in fact that will happen in the very near future. So those discussions will continue. Clearly, they are very interested in our investigation and the additional information that we're providing.

I think no one expected our team to go over there and within a matter of 24 hours have trade reestablished. This will take a considerable amount of time, and I think they will be very much interested in additional information that we can provide as it's gleaned from this investigation.

In terms of other countries that our team may visit while they're over there, I'm sorry -- I simply don't have that information at this point in time. I don't know.

Yes, sir?

MARK SHERMAN (sp): Mark Sherman with the Associated Press.

This is I guess the first business day, regular business day since the finding. Have you ordered federal inspectors to either step up to the testing of downed animals to increase the rate of testing, and out of an abundance of caution are you also ordering that the meat from those animals be (off-mike) out of the (off-mike)?

DR. PETERSEN: Regarding the question of increased testing, as Dr. DeHaven mentioned earlier we had a program in place that involved surveillance for BSE based on the assumptions we had in place at the time we created that surveillance program. Now the Department is looking at what additional testing do we need to do, what should we consider, what animals should we consider testing for BSE? And so how to do the tests, where to do the tests, is something that we're currently discussing.

As far as the meat related to BSE, again we're not aware -- the global experience is BSE is not new. Though the US has been wrestling with it for less than a week now, of course it goes back to the late 1980s and the global communities. During that time there have been quite a variety of studies looking at BSE-infected cattle -- specifically some studies

where cattle were intentionally infected with BSE, experimental infection. And even in those high infection studies, BSE, the BSE prion agent was not found to be located in the muscle meat.

Here we don't have an experimental infection. We have what appears to be a natural infection, and we know from natural infections that the exposure is even less.

So the clinical studies tell us there's virtually zero risk for BSE in the meat. And that is what gives us confidence that the U.S. supply of beef remains safe. But nevertheless, as you've heard, out of an abundance of caution we understand the public interest, and in the interest of protecting the public health we decided to go ahead and recall the meat.

We are following these products as you've heard down through the distribution chains. Any product associated with those 20 cattle is what we're finding, identifying, holding and keeping out of the food supply.

DR. DEHAVEN: Next question, please. In the back, the gentleman in the blue shirt.

DAN GOLDSTEIN: Dan Goldstein with Bloomberg News.

Mr. DeHaven, now that you've identified this animal as a dairy cow and downer cow over 6 years of age, why hasn't the USDA simply put out an order banning any dairy downer cows over a certain age to be put in the food chain until this issue has been resolved?

DR. DEHAVEN: Let me make an initial response and then provide Dr. Petersen an opportunity to add on to that as well.

As we have mentioned, based on this new situation we are seriously considering all of our options with regard to changes to our overall program. Should we increase our testing? If so, which animals should we focus that additional testing on? Should we consider removal of the specified risk materials from a broader population? Do we need to make improvements to our existing feed ban? All of those kinds of things are under consideration and under active consideration at this point in time.

But the other thing and distinction I think that we need to make, and it's important for the public to recognize, is that there has been this tendency to equate downer animals with diseased animals. And there is significant difference between the two. One is a subset of the other.

We do know that animals become nonambulatory from physical injuries. And there would be no reason from a disease standpoint or from a public safety standpoint to exclude protein from those animals from entering the human food chain. Though we need to be careful in terms of identifying what population when we say nonambulatory because Food Safety Inspection Service has been in the business since 1906 of keeping diseased animals out of the food chain.

Ken, hopefully I haven't stolen all your thunder, but let me give you a moment as well.

DR. PETERSEN: Thanks. As indicated, as someone who used to work in slaughter plants -- I've been out there; I know what occurs in those facilities. A large number of the animals, so-called nonambulatory animals that come in, are in fact recent injuries, and a

fracture or a broken pelvis or some other malady. And when you bring them into the slaughter plant you see conditions that are extremely localized. The rest of the animal is perfectly normal, perfectly healthy. And so to start incorporating all nonambulatory animals into this overarching category doesn't appear to be prudent from at least a food safety standpoint.

Now that said, we will be looking at the population of animals, looking at how we may refocus some of our surveillance efforts, but those discussions will occur over the next days and weeks.

MR. CURLETT: We have time for two more questions.

DR. DEHAVEN: We'll take one in the room, and we'll go to the bridge for the final question.

Yes, ma'am, on the aisle?

REPORTER: (off mike) -- science suggests an international (unclear) science (unclear). One of the commodities that can safely be traded from a country with a moderate to high prevalence of BSE -- if that's the case, (unclear) we ban imports of beef and will you be looking at lifting that ban from countries that have (unclear)?

DR. DEHAVEN: As has been indicated the science would suggest that meat from animals is infect -- or excuse me, is a safe commodity, and that in fact the international reaction to a finding of BSE in a country has been based largely on public perception and not the science. Admittedly the United States has been part of that problem in the past. We have been actively working at correcting that problem. And understand that progress in these areas happens over a period of time in baby steps and not giant leaps.

But in that regard we, as I mentioned following the situation in May in Canada with the single find of BSE or single case of BSE in that country, we have been allowing the importation of meat and other minimal risk or no-risk products into the United States.

We proposed this rule that would not only allow those products to continue to come in but add products to that list and potentially allow some animals into the country, and we're not just doing that for Canada -- that we would acknowledge that other countries of the world may qualify as a minimal risk country and would be then eligible similarly.

Again, this is a proposed rule. It's open for comment now. We can't commit as to whether or not we would do that, but our actions thus far signal our intent to want to go to a standard and international standard that is more based on the science than what historically has happened internationally.

And again, the U.S. has been part of the problem. We are the first country to step up to the plate and try and be part of the solution.

With that, Operator, let's go to one last question from the telephone bridge, please.

OPERATOR: Next question comes from Harry Siemans (sp). Please state your affiliation?

HARRY SIEMANS: Hi. It's Harry Siemans of Farm Watch and the Manitoba Cooperator. Chief veterinarian from Canada has basically said that some of that feed that infected that cow could have come from the United States. What's your answer to that?

DR. DEHAVEN: I'll also provide Dr. Sundlof an opportunity to comment.

We've been saying ever since the find of the single case of BSE in Canada in May of this year that our livestock industries in the U.S. and Canada have been integrated. That acknowledges that there have been movement of animals and animal products between the U.S. and Canada. And so we have a highly integrated system, and we have acknowledged that from the beginning.

Having said that, there have been good systems in place, both in the United States and Canada. And in fact that's not by accident. We have worked hand in hand to develop those systems and to have a good North American policy. We're continuing to do that in terms of having a North American strategy as we deal internationally with trying to shift the international response.

So I'll provide Dr. Sundlof an opportunity to address your question specifically as it relates to the feed issue.

DR. SUNDLOF: Thank you, Ron.

Well, one of the things that we will be doing and in fact are doing right now is going back to the establishment that we presume that the cow came from in Canada, going back through all the records trying to determine where the feed may have come from. One of the inherent difficulties in this is that the event obviously occurred a number of years ago. We can't pinpoint the exact time at which the animal may have consumed contaminated feed. Feed is purchased from a number of different outlets, and even those outlets source their materials from various different places. So it will be a difficult connection to make. But we are making every attempt to try and ascertain the origin or potential origins of the feed.

DR. DEHAVEN: And with that, that will conclude today's briefing until --

REPORTER: How about tomorrow?

DR. DEHAVEN: Well, I was going to say something about that. We'll let you know when tomorrow's briefing is going to be. They're telling me it's not set yet. For follow-up call 202-720-4623 and remember if you get the transcript of today's briefing, (www.USDA.gov). Thank you very much for attending.

(end transcript)